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ABSTRACT

Second language learners need to be given tools with which they can make language learning a personal experience. In writing, this means that they are given the skills needed to collect, organize, and present information that stimulates acquisition of new vocabulary and production of authentic writing that encourages language-related risk-taking. This approach promotes both language use confidence and study skills. To overcome writing apprehension, the class can engage in several activities: brainstorming for topics; listing ideas related to a main topic; creating a visual map of the relationships between ideas; free writing, without a specific objective in mind, often after reading a passage; and cubing, a structured strategy presenting the topic from six points of view: describing; comparing; associating; analyzing; applying; and arguing for or against. An additional technique is to encourage learners to include smells, textures, sights, and tastes in what they are writing. This can be accomplished by having learners pretend they are a camera recording all they see or imagining that they are someone else. Learners can be encouraged to keep word lists and use monolingual dictionaries for vocabulary development and should be prompted to write about things they know something about. (MSE)

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Getting Started: Overcoming "Writer's Block" in EFL Students

by Christopher E. Renner

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How often have you heard learners moan: "I don't have anything to write about, "even if they have just returned from a thirty-day tour of China? I have heard it often as I have encouraged my EFL learners to pick up a pen and begin to produce in written form the language they have studied, often for several years. EFL learners, feeling they do not have anything "valid" to write about, is what I refer to when I use the term "Writer's Block." Classically, the term refers to the fear an author has about not being able to produce work to match her previously published material. In EFL learners, "Writer's Block" is not the fear of not being able to match earlier written work, but rather the fear of writing itself.

I believe this block to writing has been put in the minds of learners for a variety of reasons beginning with how education is organized and the expectations it places on learners. Education reinforces the social norms that encourage conformity, and we "teachers" limit as we assess the potential of particular learners, by levels or by learning style, in quantifiable terms. This style of education squashes the motivation of many learners and instills within them a fear of taking risks. L_2 language acquisition is full of risk-taking, if it is going to be successful and enable the learner to communicate across cultural differences. In evaluating successful language learners as opposed to less successful learners, I have noted that the successful ones are all risk takers, but I am alarmed at how their numbers have decreased in the last five years as more and more language learners want a book to memorize in order to learn the L_2.

Another important point to take into consideration is whether the language learner can write in the L_1. By this I do not necessarily mean grammatically correct pieces of writing that have no content. I too learned by heart several chapters of books in my time as a student which I reproduced for written exams, but today I could not reproduce a single line of those memorized compositions. However, I can produce lines of my own writing, the writing that I had to take risks with. Writing that was torn up and thrown away to be resurrected and reorganized. Writing that draws from an information base that I am always adding to so that when I have to write, I do not look at a blank page and say I have nothing to write about."

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Ways of Getting Started

Rigid rules and inflexible plans do not necessarily assist language learning. If anything, they contribute to the stifling of language and the language process. Language learners need to be offered a variety of ways to collect information, store it, and retrieve it for use in authentic writing that is motivating and imaginative. I remember being taught in my Freshman English course in high school that to write well I needed to choose a topic, support the topic with main ideas which have details as their base. I remember being required to write outlines of topics that I was not interested in, then or now, submit them to my teacher and have them given back to me filled with red ink. I apparently did not understand well the difference between a topic and a main idea, or my topics were too broad, or I didn't have enough details. It was not until many years later, after I had already filled numerous notebooks with writing that I thought was not good because I could never successfully do an outline, that I discovered the rigid form of an outline was not necessarily my only choice. Funny, no one had said anything different for three additional years of high school and three of college.

What I hope has just come across to you, the reader, is that any of the following ideas are not to be considered the "only way" to begin the writing process. If learners are encouraged to be themselves and not conform to some norm, that no one is responsible for creating but everyone follows, they will create their own ways of collecting, organizing and writing about the information they collect. What I do is present these possible means of reaching the end of solid, coherent, concise writing in which the learner is able to express herself freely and authentically. The other important point is that as "instructor," I use these strategies in front of my learners and I write with them. How can an instructor teach writing if she does not write?

Brainstorming

I believe this to be one of the best ways to get at the information that is already within us. When you brainstorm you put down on paper as fast as you can everything that comes into your head. There is no need to write complete sentences (I find this to be the first hurdle to get over with my EFL learners), nor do you have to be logical or critical. You want to find out what you have in your head about a particular subject, what comes up that you least suspect, what is obvious and what is new.

To give you examples of the various strategies I am going to present, I have decided not only to give you an example but to invite you to participate as well. For the sake of coherency I am going to use the same topic in each exercise. I have chosen a rather common topic, my mother, partly because she and I are working on some short stories about her childhood and partly because I know the subject well, something that facilitates the writing process.

So, shall we begin? You can choose another topic if you like, something that is more

interesting, or something that you would like to know more about. You can brainstorm along with me, there is plenty of writing space next to my list.

MOM

- from the Kentucky coal mines
- 10 brothers and sisters
- one sister died of hunger
- Mom raised her daughter
- worked for 40 years - nurse
- married my father in 1946
- moved to Kansas in 1948
- raised a younger sister and brother
- did not have much schooling
- was very beautiful girl
- married 1st time at age 16
- lived with grandparents during depression
- went to Maine in 1940 to pick potatoes
- her mother died in 1940
- through a cousin met Dad
- moved back to Indiana in 1957
- moved back to Kansas in 1959
- took care of the children of the village
- worked the night shift
- always stood up for the Catholic Church, though she wasn't Catholic
- always raised a garden and flowers
- encouraged her children to travel and learn
- tolerant
- never liked "drinking"
- canning her vegetables
- going to the county fair

And I could go on. That list took me three minutes to think up. There is a lot of information in it, enough to write a book about. If I were to write a composition, I would take only one item

and enlarge on it, once again brainstorming about that one idea and seeing where it leads me.

Brainstorming can also be done in groups. In this case the dynamics of the activity change as learners work off from each other's ideas and often get fresh approaches to old ideas. A weakness of the group activity is that is can appear silly, or just horseplay, because it is relatively unstructured. If the students are presented with clear objectives I find that it is very successful at breaking the mental blocks to writing and gives a lot of information to work with.

Listing

It may sound too simple but making lists is simple, direct and gets the information down on paper. Listing enables the learner to quickly see all the related main ideas of a topic and then to begin to organize them into sequences that say what the writer means in logical and coherent order. A typical exercise I give my learners is to write about their summer but often the writing pieces I receive to read are so confusing that the sequence of the events is impossible to understand. Somehow the writer is able to return to Italy before going to the beach in Greece just after eating a wonderful supper. This is because the writer did not follow any program but just wrote what entered her/his head.

The object of listing is getting the facts, details and points that already exist in the mind of the writer down on paper. This also points out the weakness of listing in that to use it requires previous information to be there and within the reach of the writer. It differs from Brainstorming, which is used to explore whatever comes to mind, in that the writer already has an idea of what she wants to write about and has some facts floating around in her/his head.

In looking at my brainstorming about my mother I see that her family appears several times; since this is information I already know, it will work well for making a list.

FAMILY

- brothers and sisters: Gracey, married Carl, three daughters
Faye, married Leon, two daughters
Altie, married Bill, five children
Frank, married Juanitta, five children
Zelmie, died during the depression
Orine, married, divorced, no children
Carl, married Barbara, four daughters
Louise, married Bob, three children
Joyce, married, early widow, one son
Bill Gibson, married - divorced - remarried, three children

> *- Gracey: member Christian Church; non drinker; honest; warm; good fried chicken; liked to organize family picnics; always goes to the family cemetery on Memorial Day; one married daughter; two grand-daughters; other two girls both school teachers, never married. Widow; misses Carl, Carl was a "drinker", fought in WWII, worked in a factory, liked driving Chrysler vehicles, quit smoking when he was 50.*

I would continue this exercise making lists about each brother and sister. The list about took me the time I needed to type it out on the computer because it is all information I already have in my head but never took the time to write down. Sometimes, the lists I have seen contain less than ten words and from these ten words the learner is able to produce a composition. From this I have been able to draw the conclusion that not all learners need the same type of list. While mine, above, is rather detailed, another writer might need only vague clues to help her/him organize. On the other hand, I have had to encourage others to take more time with the activity and get more details down on paper, otherwise they write superficial pieces which cover the main ideas but give no details about the ideas presented.

Mapping

In its essence mapping is another way to brainstorm but it has more structure and takes a little more time. It also works more with the right side of the brain which is supposedly our creative side. In mapping the topic or subject is placed in the center of the page and as ideas occur about the topic, lines are drawn radiating out from it on which the idea is written. Generally, I follow an idea to its end and as the map develops I can begin to connect conclusions.

In doing the map on the next page, I was surprised by "a loner in Kansas"; it was something I did not expect to come out but it is quite true, even if she has now lived there for thirty-five years. I drew arrows back to the fact of her childhood several times; that is an indicator that her childhood is where conclusions can be drawn from. I have always taken pride in the fact that my mother comes from the background she does but if I am going to write about that background I am going to have to deal with many things that, as of right now, I do not have enough information to give a complete picture. I will have to research this area more if I am going to write about it.

Mapping is very useful if I do not think I have anything to write about or if I want to get some ideas down and begin developing them. I use it very often in my writing, in fact, I have a map I am following as I write this article.

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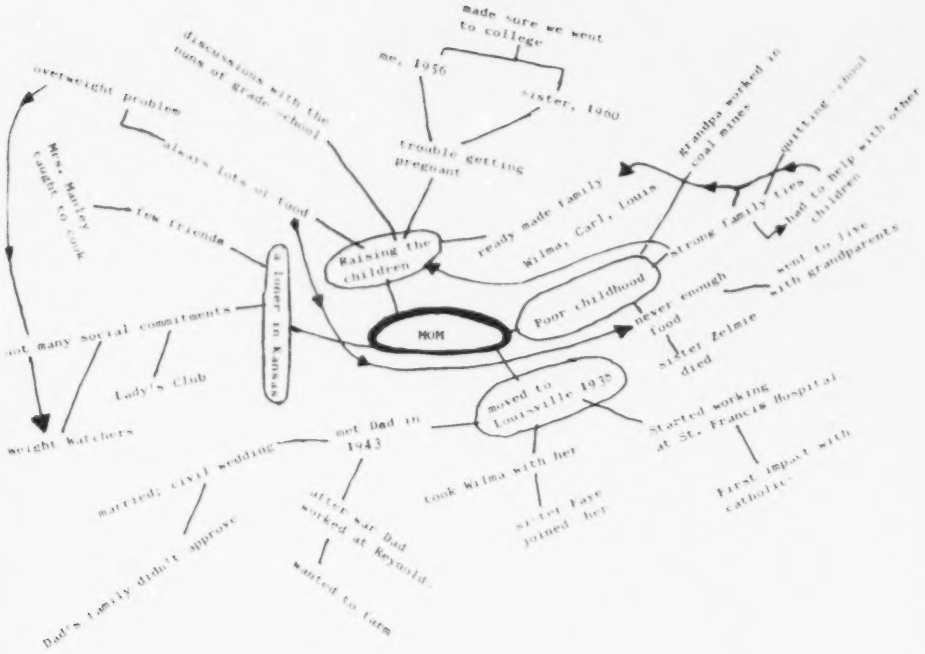

Free Writing

In college I majored in psychology and in one class I was introduced to a technique of writing away anger. The idea is that when you are upset about something, you pick up pen and paper and write whatever enters your head until the anger has passed. Free writing is quite the same idea but you do not have to be angry to use it although, I would say that the best writing is usually motivated by an emotion. We will talk more about that in a minute.

When you free write you have no specific objective in mind that you must write about; you write whatever comes to your mind, letting your ideas flow from your mind onto the paper via the pen. Unlike brainstorming or mapping, you need to suppress your critical sense in this activity. Often the learners I have used this with have been resistant towards this activity because it goes against much of what they have been "taught" by our educational system. Writing just to write and see what happens is not part of the objectives we have set up for them to achieve. They are supposed to produce, line by line, what we tell them. I have found that this activity is very successful in responding, getting the learner's reactions, to reading activities. After the learner has read a passage I direct her to free write about the passage for

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five minutes. It reinforces what was read and helps prepare the learner for any discussion that will follow.

Now I will free write about my topic.

> *Writing about Mom. This is something I've always wanted to do but as usual have never been able to get it started. I think that I need to spend some time describing her personality and character. She isn't very tall by today's standards but I suspect that for her time she was average. She's been overweight since the early sixties, I think, that is, when she started to feel that she could enjoy life a little. Finally, her younger brother and sister had finished school and had gotten married, even if my father had not approved of the married partners. It was also about this time that she forbade my father to move again! He had been quite the wanderer since he had entered the army in the early forties. She had her own home and she was going to stay put. I never understood how she came to be so in love with flat Kansas after growing up in the mountains. I remember the first time I went back to Kentucky, I was in fourth grade and I was overcome by the winding roads that took us back up in the backwoods to where my grandfather lived. Mother has never told me for sure but I think there was some sort of disagreement between her and grandpa about taking the younger children to Kansas. I know that those hills sure didn't offer much of a future for them but I don't understand why he allowed them to go either. Today my mother interests me, she is living that part of life when her friends start to die. In fact, in the last year she has lost two friends she had known since she came to Kansas. Sometimes I wonder if she is afraid of growing old. She worked at the hospital until she was 68 and I think she retired only because of pressure from her children and friends. Mom has three sets of friends in the village, plus a sister of my father. All of them are more or less 70 years old. They keep active and sometimes I think they are living better now than when my sister and I were in college.*

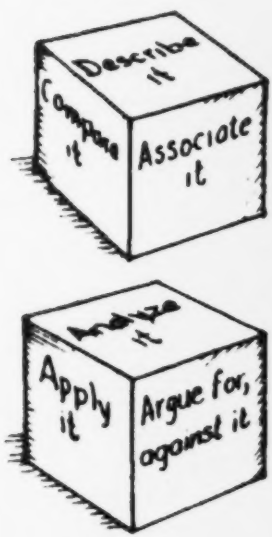
I could go on but that was ten minutes worth of writing with one interruption. When I read over what I have written I see I was supposed to describe my mother's character and I never did it. Other ideas came up and took me to another place that presented another idea that took me somewhere else. Now I must decide if I will follow the paths that have come up or if I will go back to the original idea. Sometimes I have the learners go back and circle the main ideas that have come up during the free writing process so that they stand out and offer the learner an idea to write about for a future composition. Some of the things are personal and I never force a learner to write about the personal unless they want to. Going public puts the learner in a position of vulnerability but readers generally like to read the specific and private because

it sparks memories in their minds as they read. This idea is important to get across to the learners, if their writing is going to give them a sense of satisfaction and pride.

Cubing

Cubing differs from the above three strategies in its structuredness. It is fast-moving (once again a common problem is getting the learners to jot down ideas and not write complete sentences), and presents the topic from six different points of view. It is more analytical and is usually best for longer pieces of writing. I do not use this method very often - it reminds me too much of those horrible outlines I was required to do in high school - but I present it to my learners and there have been several who have applied it in writing both in L_2 and L_1.

The strengths of cubing are that it corresponds to the way people usually think about a subject. It offers the writer the possibility of perspective that most likely yields ideas for essay writing. Its main purpose is to set up a thinking structure in the mind that helps the writer organize ideas already present and point out areas that need to be researched more. On the other hand, its weaknesses are that it is not adaptable to all topics, for example, the topic I have chosen to use in this article and it sometimes glosses over, thus not giving enough depth to what is being written.



You should spend no more than three to five minutes on each of the six sides.

1. **Describe it.** Use your senses. What colors, shapes, sizes, textures and so forth.

2. **Compare it.** What is it similar to and different from?

3. **Associate it.** What does it make you think of? Write down whatever comes to your mind. Let your mind go and see what events, places, people, times and things come up.

4. **Analyze it.** Tell how it is made, what created it. If you don't know, make something up.

5. **Apply it.** Tell what you can and cannot do with it.

6. **Argue for or against it.** Use any reasons that you want, be they silly, rational, political or sentimental.

When all six sides are finished, I ask the learners to read over what they have written and direct them to circle or underline an angle or perspective that strikes them as particularly promising. This will probably be the focus of the essay and offers them a starting point. In all probability there will be one thing that the learner enjoyed writing during the activity, something that struck her interest and made the pen move a little faster across the paper, even if the topic appeared frivolous, that can offer the base to start writing.

To give you an example of cubing I have chosen the city I work in, Naples, as my topic.

Describe it. Sprawling, crowded, struggling, fast-moving. Dirty, disorderly. Breathtaking beauty. Silver sea, night lights on rolling hills. Beautiful dark people, pulsating street life. Always on the make. Ancient demanding lover. Violent. Abused by the institution of the State. Robbed of her richness to fill the pockets of a few.

Compare it. (To any typical American city other than New York). Naples is nothing like a typical American city. It is too old. American cities are without color and life. Too organized, too sterile. American cities have more green areas, parks, playgrounds. There is no street life compared to Naples. None have the views of Capri or the beauty of Posillipo. Drugs are more or less the same. I think there is more violence in America. At least in Naples you can talk to the robbers, in America they shoot you first, then take your money.

Associate it. Earthquakes, Ischia, beaches, sea. Great food. Loud people. Too many cars. Closed mentality. Soccer. Pizza. Boys chew gum, girls as well. Passion. Learning to be an EFL instructor. Learning more about myself.

Analyze it. 3 million people squeezed into a postage stamp. No concept of communal effort, every person for him/herself. Power-hungry politicians that control and prevent progress. Disrespect for the State. Emotional beings forced to obey cold-hearted people's rules. Love or hate relationship. Naples is made up of a little bit of everything.

Apply it. A great center for sociological studies on how people make ends meet. A work of art that should be preserved and protected from the rapists who seek to destroy her. A cultural center to promote international understanding. The last great pagan center in Europe. A center to teach people how to enjoy the simple things in life and fight the empty pleasure of consumerism.

Argue. I think Naples is one of the best cities in the world because of her people and her art. She could be made better by putting the politicians in jail and getting back the money that was taken from her during the unification of Italy. Give back pride to her citizens and you would have a one great city.

Maybe my topic was too big. I was frustrated while doing this cube because I have so many

different emotions about the city. But I think the "love-hate relationship" is a key in understanding the city of Naples. There is a lot to write about here. I often use Naples as an example in my lessons to show the learners how much they have that they take for granted.

Opening Doors to Experience

Finally, learners need to be educated to be more attentive to what is around them, to use their senses and increase their awareness. Part of the block to writing is also a block to learning because we have conditioned the learners not to use their senses, their intuition to learn. Rather we keep putting books in their hands and requiring they "learn" what the book tells them without giving them the opportunity to experience it.

A simple way of enriching writing is getting the learners to include the smells, textures, sights and tastes of what they are writing about. I often hand back compositions that tell narrative stories in which all the senses are dead. We need to increase within the learners a receptiveness to the life they are living; that it is interesting and has value and people want to read about it.

A simple exercise I often assign my learners to do is to pretend that they are a camera and go to a spot and for half an hour write down everything they see, using their senses and being objective, noting every possible detail about what they see. Is this writing? I believe that it is because writing begins long before the first line of the first draft. This type of activity gives the learner the resources he/she needs to not only write but explore vocabulary and build confidence. Once again, I do not worry about complete sentences in this camera game. The objective is to collect data that will be used later to enrich a writing piece.

Another simple exercise is to have the learner put herself/himself in the shoes of someone else. To imagine that they are the teacher, policeman or doctor they so often see walking about. To imagine what their lives must be like why they have the facial expressions they do; what makes them happy or sad. If the learner has trouble doing this, I have sent them out to do interviews or read interviews and from the information they have collected to construct this experience of being someone else.

Reading responses, that is, learners reacting to the information they have read, offer more possibilities for collecting information to use in writing. By giving the learners the possibility to free write about what they have read, emotional responses begin to happen. As I stated earlier, good writing has an emotional stimulus. When the learner's emotions are engaged in the writing activity, she/he produces more and refines exactly what she/he wants to say. The desire to know more, to agree or disagree with a presented point of view or to offer a solution to a problem, all grow out of reading responses. This task also gives the learner the possibility to use the new vocabulary presented in the reading text and reinforces it for future use.

I encourage learners to keep word lists and use monolingual dictionaries; the word-list idea I have used for several years myself. It began when I was teaching a course preparing candidates

for the TOEFL exam. In the book I was using, I found a lot of words which I did not have in my vocabulary nor was I sure of their meaning. I started my list and have kept adding to it. Good writing implies that the writer has the ability to choose words that transmit the precise meaning the writer wants. By encouraging learners to develop personal lists of vocabulary words we are no longer imposing on them to learn but they become responsible for advancing or stagnating in acquiring L_2.

Giving the learners the possibility to take responsibility for their language learning is a key concept in developing "successful" learners. A simple way of helping this process is to give the individual learner the liberty to choose what topic he/she is going to write about. This enables the learner to invest personally in the writing process. No longer is it "the topic the teacher gave me to do", where the responsibility for producing good writing remains with the teacher, who chooses the topic, and therefore the teacher must know how to write about it. If you insist on giving topics and by that I include the majority of all writing tasks in coursebooks, be sure that you are able to write about the topic before you give it to the learners.

I cannot write about making cheese because I have never seen the process. I cannot write about India because I have never been there. All the information I have about cheese making and India is what I have received from books and movies; I have no personal experience, my senses have never been there. Trying to write about such a topic is unauthentic and artificial and is not stimulating for the learner. EFL learners need to write with information, not with empty words.

Conclusion

L_2 language learners need to be given the tools with which they can make language learning a personal experience.

In writing, this means that they are given the skills needed to collect, organize and present information that stimulates their acquisition of new vocabulary and production of authentic writing that encourages them to take risks with the L_2. By using the above-mentioned strategies, the learner is enabled to approach writing with more confidence because he/she has an information base to draw from in producing written L_2. Additionally, the learner is given study skills, which can also be applied to L_1, that allow for autonomy and self-directed learning.

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